

Wilding: The Return of Nature to a British Farm

by Isabella Tree, Picador 2018



Some readers may remember the wildlife group's visit to Knepp Castle Estate one evening in July 2015. Two old army trucks transported us around the estate, stopping at intervals to look at the free ranging livestock at close quarters as well as to climb viewing platforms to watch deer. At that time the Rewilding Project, the subject of this book, was in its 14th year.

When Charlie Burrell, inherited the 3500-acre Knepp estate from his grandparents in 1987 it was not doing well. The estate was already losing money and trying to improve matters by adopting intensive arable farming methods on the heavy clay proved not to be profitable. Bankruptcy threatened. Something had to change. Isabella Tree tells the story of how, in 2000, she and her husband made a life-changing decision to return the estate to nature. In that year they met Frans Vera, whose pioneering nature reserve near Amsterdam changed the way they thought about Knepp and inspired them to let nature take the lead in rewilding the estate. Their decision was also influenced by the sad state of much of the farmed countryside of England. Intensive agriculture, with its use of chemical fertilizers, heavy machinery, pesticides and herbicides had meant the disappearance of native flowers from grassland, compaction of the soil and destruction of wildlife habitat. Populations of many birds, small mammals and insects were all in decline.

Fencing the estate was a huge task but necessary before introducing the grazing, browsing and foraging animals: Fallow Deer in 2002, Longhorn cattle and Exmoor ponies in 2003, Tamworth pigs in 2004 and Red Deer in 2009. The project was not greeted with enthusiasm by local people - in fact most were disapproving and sceptical. Letting nature run wild, indeed! In August 2003 50 neighbouring farmers and landowners were invited to an afternoon of presentations to explain the project followed by supper. The presentations were met with stony silence and when Charlie stood up to show how he envisaged the landscape of Knepp changing into rampant scrub and wetland the room erupted into dissident murmuring and shaking of heads. It became apparent that the audience felt that it was an 'affront to the

efforts of every self-respecting farmer, an immoral waste of land, an assault on Britishness itself’.

It must have been a disappointing reaction to say the least but Charlie and Isabella were undaunted. The recovery of wildlife has been spectacular. Turtle doves, whose numbers in Britain had declined steeply since the 1960s, are now breeding in good numbers in the estate. Knepp now holds the largest population of Purple Emperors in Britain. Nightingales and bats are abundant now as well as a host of small mammals, birds and invertebrates not to be seen on neighbouring farmland. These successes have made the project more acceptable to local people but some responses have not been so welcome. Some dog walkers allow their pets to rampage off the footpaths, chasing free-roaming herds and putting up ground-nesting birds. Once a father and son on horseback chased the cattle at breakneck speed, their dogs snapping at the calves’ heels. Poaching has occurred, snares set and deer shot.

The book is such an honest account of the difficulties and the ways these have been overcome. But it is more than that - well written, entertaining, instructive, thoroughly researched. Who knew that there were 30 Sussex words for mud; for example - clodgy, a muddy field path after rain; gawn, sticky foul-smelling mud; gubber, black mud of rotting organic matter; ike, a muddy mess, and so on. Or that green woodpeckers have to store their long gluey tongues by coiling them behind the skull, over the eyes and into the right nostril when at rest. There are discussions about the heath benefits of choosing pasture-fed cattle over grain-fed animals, the enormous capacity for carbon storage of soil that is better managed and the wisdom of questioning our ideas of the how the countryside should look. You will simply have to read this book. It is so inspiring.

Jacqui Hutson